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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001015

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SUBJECT: PPT: WHAT DOESN'T DESTROY US, MAKES US STRONGER

REF: A. CARACAS 820
[1](#)B. CARACAS 616

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A perhaps over-optimistic Patria Para Todos (PPT) Secretary General and National Assembly Deputy Jose Albornoz told PolCouns May 18 that he was confident his party would survive the current pressure to join Chavez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), and would eventually reconcile with Chavez. He thought the PSUV would end up slightly smaller than Chavez' previous party, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), and was pessimistic about prospects for coalition partner Podemos, which he criticized for being too vocal in its criticism of the PSUV. Albornoz thought ongoing efforts to recall elected officials would fail, as political parties have conceded that it is a waste of resources to seek to recall an official whose position would be up for grabs next year. Albornoz also gave credence to rumors that discontent over some of Chavez' proposals may be holding up progress toward implementing "profound" constitutional changes. End Summary.

PPT Down, but Not Out

[1](#)2. (C) During a May 18 meeting with PolCouns and Poloff, Patria Para Todos (PPT) Secretary General Jose Albornoz said he was optimistic that the party would survive and ultimately be strengthened by its decision not to join Chavez' United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) (Ref A). Comparing the ruling coalition to an elevator, Albornoz said the PPT was currently "on a lower floor," but would "rise to a higher one again." He added that, "the important thing is to be in the elevator." Albornoz acknowledged that PPT's decision not to dissolve into the PSUV had caused friction with Chavez, but thought the party's relatively low-key announcement of its decision compared, for example, to fellow coalition partner Podemos' public criticism of the PSUV, would allow for an eventual reconciliation. Albornoz claimed that public opinion also seemed to support the PPT's decision, and that consequently the party has experienced an increase in membership requests. He said they were putting off accepting any new members until August, however, when friction may have died down.

[1](#)3. (C) Albornoz said that roughly 97% of PPT's base voted against joining the PSUV during the PPT's national conference in mid-April. Many members reportedly opposed the move

because they did not want to be perceived as supporting local Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) leaders, such as Caracas Mayor Juan Barreto and Libertador Mayor Freddy Bernal, with whom the party has had disagreements in the past. (Note: AlbornoZ claimed that focus groups conducted after the 2006 election indicated a similar sentiment motivated pro-Chavez supporters to vote for the PPT rather than the MVR in the presidential race, contributing to its 600,000 vote total.) If anything, AlbornoZ said the decision helped the party shed some dead weight, characterizing some of the defectors as having obstructed party development and being more driven by opportunism than by ideology. He noted they may have lost a few generals, but the rank and file remained committed. He claimed those who left did not take many followers with them. (Note: PPT has so far lost nine of 13 board members, which included six of its 11 National Assembly deputies, as well as both of its cabinet officials, one of its two governors, and various mayors.)

Prospects for Coalition Partners

¶4. (C) At the rate registration for the PSUV was going, AlbornoZ thought the party might be smaller than its predecessor Fifth Republic Movement (MVR). He thought the PSUV had played its best cards to encourage membership, using Chavez and VP Jorge Rodriguez to rally supporters, and threatening BRV employees. Now that registration has covered the major cities, AlbornoZ did not think there would be any significant gains in membership.

¶5. (C) Returning to the earlier analogy, it was unclear whether AlbornoZ thought Podemos was even in the elevator. He said Podemos would face a tough road ahead because of its vocal opposition to the PSUV, which had alienated Chavez and his supporters. He claimed not to be surprised at the number

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of Podemos defections (Ref B), opining that many of that party's members were opportunistic.

Recall Referenda Will Fail

¶6. (C) AlbornoZ was confident that none of the recall referenda would succeed. He claimed that the BRV's initial plan was to encourage recalls against weaker pro-government governors, believing their recalls would fail, strengthening their position in the run up to the 2008 state elections. However, government and opposition political parties had since realized that a recall campaign is costly for both sides and would accomplish little since even if the official is recalled, they will just be replaced by someone from the same party. Since it was too late to stop the recall process, AlbornoZ claimed the BRV had directed the National Electoral Council (CNE) to use fingerprint machines during the petition drive to ensure that recall promoters would fail to collect sufficient signatures in favor of a recall. (Comment: Employing the machines is likely to discourage voter participation, given Chavista and opposition supporters' strong suspicions that the government can use the machines to track their political preferences. Signatures must be collected from 20 percent of the electorate to trigger a recall vote.)

Constitutional Reform

¶7. (C) Asked about the status of Chavez' apparently stalled constitutional reform initiative, AlbornoZ opined that divisions within mid- and lower levels of the MVR were constraining progress. AlbornoZ, who is also a National Assembly (NA) deputy, suggested that there were divisions

among deputies, as has been recently rumored, as well as among other high ranking Chavista officials. Citing Chavez' "new geometry" redistricting ideas (the "fourth motor" of socialist transformation) as an example, Albornoz said that current governors and mayors could not be expected to willingly give up the little remaining influence they have.

18. (C) In terms of specific issues that might be included in the constitutional proposal, Albornoz said provisions regarding the recall referendum will likely be revised, as parties realize that it is a relatively meaningless mechanism for change. He also mentioned that PPT proposed re-instituting state funding for political parties and changing provisions on proportional representation to ban morochas. (Note: The 1999 Constitution eliminated funding for political parties. Morochas are an electoral device whereby a party competing for NA seats could run its best-known candidates in single district races under the colors of a clone party and put its lesser-known candidates on its own party list, thus reducing the possibility of minority party representation.) (Comment: Given Albornoz' estrangement from the ruling circle in the NA, it is likely that he is out of the loop on the actual details of the BRV's constitutional amendment proposals.)

Comment

19. (C) Although the PPT may attract some Chavistas that are bothered by the idea of a single revolutionary party, Albornoz, projections for the PPT's future seem optimistic. The PPT's already limited influence has certainly diminished with the defections of important government officials. Despite Albornoz' extensive efforts to curry favor with Chavez over the past year--such as by leading a National Assembly witch hunt of Sumate--the PPT may find itself out in the cold if Chavez maintains his "with me or against me" approach to party building (Ref A), as is likely. Albornoz' predictions for the PSUV and Podemos are more credible. The PSUV continues to show steady--if not slow--growth, registering a total of almost two million voters after four weekends of party registration, according to official CNE figures. PSUV organizers may not meet Chavez' goal of recruiting four million members by the end of the registration drive without ramping up pressure or manipulating the process, but the party will still dominate the Venezuelan political landscape.

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